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Closing the Gap: Intercultural Dialogues Between Undergraduate Home Students in the UK and International Students from China



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Abstract

This paper presents research on the potential of classroom dialogues to facilitate greater intercultural communication between undergraduate home students in the UK studying Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) and Master's level students from China. The project put both cohorts together to discuss culture-related topics in Mandarin Chinese. Nine CFL students and 18 international students from China participated in the study. Five meetings were arranged, with the discussions being led by the students. The data collection includes videos of the group discussions and recordings of individual student reflections obtained after each discussion. Byram's intercultural competence framework was used to analyse the data. The findings indicate that social interaction enables the participants to demonstrate intercultural competence in several dimensions (attitudes, knowledge and skills of discovery and interaction), with skills of interpreting and relating and critical cultural awareness being more limited. The reflections also showed that the participants expressed varying degrees of anxiety about the discussion. CFL students reported their foreign language anxiety, and Chinese students were mainly concerned about potential prejudice against China. Intracultural competence was also discussed in this study.

Keywords: intercultural competence, intracultural competence, communication strategies, classroom dialogues, Mandarin Chinese learning

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within this paper.

Introduction

In a Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) class in the UK, a group of undergraduates recounted an incident they had just experienced with a Chinese student on campus:

On the way here, when we were practising our presentations [in Chinese] and laughing at each other's pronunciation. Then a Chinese student passed by. She thought we spoke Chinese to make fun of her, so she started shouting at us. We got into an argument with her. She's very odd.

Such an encounter between home students in the UK and international students could have had a different outcome, leading to intercultural communication and potential friendship. Unfortunately, it instead sparked unexpected conflict due to a misunderstanding. This incident highlighted the fact that intercultural encounters do not always bring intercultural competence (IC) (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012) and the need to create more meaningful interaction opportunities for students to develop their IC.

Internationalisation is a dominant agenda and has been frequently articulated aspiration in UK higher education (Baker & Fang, 2021). The term encapsulates both the desire to be international in outlook, drawing in students from across the globe and being more genuinely inclusive of the diverse cultural backgrounds of those students in internationalising the curriculum (Clifford & Montgomery, 2017; Leask, 2015). This transformational potential could be seen as an example of IC, which is a trait that universities want their students to develop in order to become "global citizens" (Clifford & Montgomery, 2017; Leask & Carroll, 2011) who can access and successfully navigate the globalised employment market. Genuine intercultural communication should break down or transcend binaries (home versus international students), reducing the gap between "self" and "other" by creating opportunities to recognise similarities and differences on an individual level rather than a national level (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017; Harvey et al., 2019).

Some studies have shown that pairing international students and home students to work together can increase their intercultural experience. For example, Eisenclas and Trevaskes (2007) designed a series of practical projects in Australia to facilitate international students working with home students. Their emphasis was on practical ways to both help international students overcome their sense of social isolation and to benefit both local and international students by increasing their sensitivity to and tolerance for diverse cultural practices. Similarly, the reports of Leask and Carroll (2011) and de Hei et al. (2020) perceived improvements in intercultural communication through mixing home and international students in mentoring programmes and collaborative learning projects. Such projects would hopefully mitigate the lack of social integration of international students (Harman, 2004; Spencer-Oatley et al., 2017) which can hinder in-class interaction, create resentment and reinforce stereotypical views.

However, other research has also pointed out that even in the evidently internationalised space of higher education, opportunities for genuine encounters are rare due to heavy workloads and international students lacking entry points to home country students' groups (Lazarević, 2023). This situation is particularly pertinent for Chinese students, the largest group of international students in the UK (Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2020), who have reported issues with social integration and forming friendships (Spencer-Oatley et al., 2017).

This study sought to create opportunities for Chinese students studying at a UK university (C1s hereafter) and UK home students studying Chinese as a foreign language in a CFL course (C2s

hereafter) to engage in a series of culturally related discussions to explore how intercultural discussion contributes to participants' IC. Two research questions were designed for this research:

1. To what extent do intercultural dialogues contribute to the participants' IC?
2. What are the participants' reflections on the experience of intercultural dialogue?

Literature Review

LC and Intercultural Communicative Competence

“Whatever a person's linguistic competence in a foreign language, when they interact with someone from a different culture, they bring to the situation their knowledge of the world.” (Byram, 2021, p. 80).

The quote above highlights that interaction with someone from a different culture requires more than linguistic competence to exchange information, as it also requires the skills and knowledge to make sense of their interlocutor's world (their values, behaviour etc). Byram (1997, 2021) distinguishes between IC and intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The former refers to the “ability to interact in their own language with people from another culture, drawing upon their knowledge about intercultural communication, their attitudes of interest in otherness and their skills in interpreting, relating and discovering” (Byram, 2021, p. 156), whereas ICC refers to the ability to interact with people from another social group “in another language”, ensuring that the success of the interaction is measured in terms of the effective exchange of information and the establishment and maintenance of human relationships (Byram, 2021, p. 81). In the ICC model, Byram (1997, 2021) established five dimensions or “savoirs”, as delineated in Figure 1:

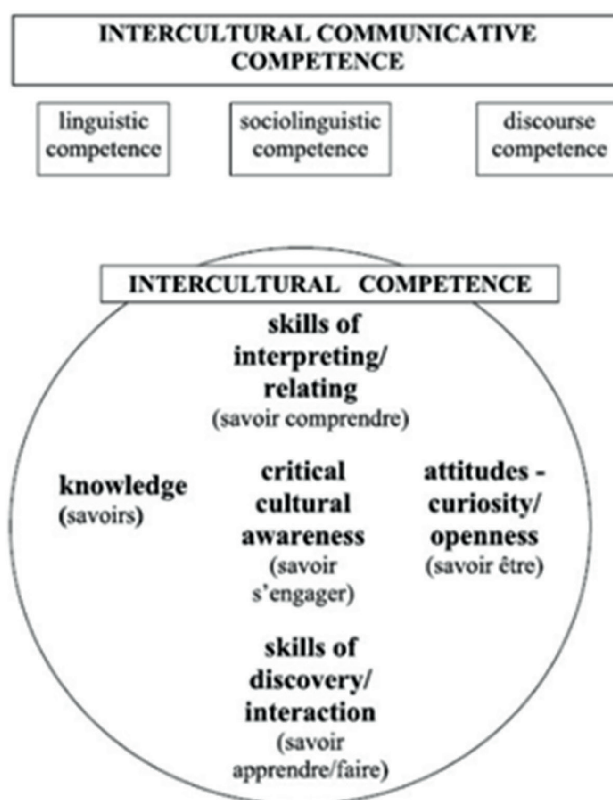


Figure 1 *Intercultural Competence and Intercultural Communicative Competence; Adapted from Byram (2021, p. 107).*

The attitudes identified are those of openness and curiosity and “of readiness to suspend disbelief and judgement with respect to other’s meanings, beliefs, values and behaviours.” (Byram, 2021, pp. 83–84). Knowledge can relate to understanding the products and practices of other social groups (Abrams, 2020; Hua, 2014) in addition to one’s own, as well as knowledge of the process of social interaction (Byram, 2021).

The skills of discovery and interaction refer to the ability to build specific knowledge of a culture and operate it in interactions. The skills of interpreting and relating indicate the ability to interpret events from another culture and relate them to one’s own culture. According to Byram (2021), these four dimensions can be acquired through experience and reflection without the intervention of teachers and educational institutions. However, if they are acquired with the help of teachers, ICC can be integrated within a philosophy of political education to develop learners’ critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997, 2009) or reflexivity (Jin, 2020).

Though obtaining knowledge of specific cultures is important, the objective of ICC is focused on developing learners’ skills to operate successfully in intercultural interactions. As Aguilar (2008) pointed out, “in ICC, what is important is not the amount of knowledge transmitted, but the attitudes, skills and critical awareness that learners develop” (p. 69). For instance, knowledge across different social or cultural groups may lead to the realisation of “different value orientations” around conceptions of time, power relations, communication styles, task focus, concepts of universality and feelings of individuality (Bickley et al., 2014). ICC can be seen as relating to the ability to cope successfully with such cultural differences (Douglas & Rosvold, 2018), with the second language (L2) learning classroom as a key site for exploring them (Hua, 2014; Kramsch, 2014).

The ICC model is influential across disciplines and has played a crucial role in foreign language teaching since it was first published in 1997. However, scholars from other fields of study have raised concerns about Byram’s framework. For example, in applied linguistics, some scholars have criticised the models for overlooking the language component or simplistically portraying the developmental sequence of IC as parallel to the acquisition of linguistic competence in an L2 (Fantini, 2009; Jackson, 2019). Jackson (2019) called on intercultural theorists to pay much more attention to the linguistic dimension of intercultural communications, especially the pragmatic elements in L2 or lingua franca interactions.

Although exploring differences is a salient factor in considering ICC, especially within the language classroom, some intercultural experts have questioned whether focusing on these might lead to essentialist views of other cultures, the so-called “large culture” conceptualised by Holliday (1999). This term refers to viewing culture as prescribed ethnic, national and international entities. This can result in overgeneralisation and otherisation and can lead to “block narratives”, which signify an essentialist discourse of culture and can be easily converted into cultural prejudice, relying on “imagined national culture”, thus obstructing the possibility of understanding and sharing at the point of tolerating an Other who can never be like “us” (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017, p. 267). Holliday (1999) advocates for instead a focus on small cultures, which refers to “the composite of cohesive behaviour within any social grouping” (p. 237) and later linked this to the notion of “thread narratives” in recognition of “the complexity of cultural negotiation, allow multiple connections and constructions of cultural identity” (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017, p. 267)

Both the paradigms of large versus small culture(s) and block versus thread narratives point towards the idea that each individual is not just the product of their culture and society but also the maker of their own culture. Dervin and Gross (2016) argued that as all individuals have multiple attributes and identities that may intersect when they engage in intercultural interactions, intercultural communication

experts should acknowledge the principle of “diverse diversities” (p. 5) in their conceptual frameworks and shy away from essentialist notions of culture.

Research Method

Our study was situated within a UK university and involved 9 undergraduates studying Chinese as part of their degree and 18 postgraduate students from China studying various arts and humanities MA degrees. These two groups of students met monthly for culture-based discussions during regular teaching hours for CFL students. The Chinese language proficiency of the undergraduates varied, with eight students having spent up to 12 months in China for year of study abroad. The number of C1 attendees in each discussion varied, as these students attended voluntarily outside their timetabled degree classes. The average number of students in each discussion was 14. Before the meeting, all the participants were informed that the intercultural dialogues would take place in a CFL classroom in Mandarin Chinese. Two weeks before each meeting, the tutors sent out discussion topics to invite the participants to contribute discussion questions. The discussion topics were all related to the topics C2s had recently learned about in their language lessons, including relationships, the ideal job, Chinese New Year and Christmas, and “what if” questions.

At the start of each discussion, the tutors divided the students into two big group tables so that every C1 sat next to a C2. The floor was then given to the students, who controlled the whole discussion. Five meetings led by the students were arranged across the academic year, and each meeting lasted for one hour. All the meetings were video-recorded. After each session, the participants were asked to produce oral reflections in English about their thoughts and feelings in terms of both the way the discussion happened and what they discussed. The use of English for this part of the project was to ensure that the C1 students also had opportunities to practice their target language. At the end of the meeting, the participants were given a set of prompts to respond to which were designed to avoid prescribing or precisely defining culture or intercultural communication (see Appendix A). Twenty-one reflections were received across the six discussions, with twice as many responses coming from the C1s.

The data collection included video recordings of the group discussions and individual audio-recorded reflections. All discussion recordings were transcribed in Mandarin Chinese (the original language used in the discussion), then translated into English and viewed twice to double-check the accuracy of the transcription. The reflection data were transcribed automatically and again checked for the accuracy of the transcription (spoken grammatical errors remained uncorrected).

When analysing both sets of data, the researchers first read through the transcriptions and highlighted significant issues emerging from the raw data, which were then categorised into themes. The coding of these themes was checked twice. The categories were generated through the analysis as outcomes, rather than prior assumptions being used to sort the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The dominant themes are reported in the next section. In this study, C1 has been used to refer to international students from China who speak Mandarin Chinese as their first language (numbered C1.1 to C1.18), and C2 refers to home undergraduate students who speak Mandarin Chinese as a second or additional language (numbered C2.1 to C2.9).

Results

This section presents and analyses the classroom discussion data and then discusses the students’ reflections. Both will be discussed with reference to Byram’s IC framework.

The classroom discussion data show that the participants used various communication strategies and demonstrated various degrees of IC. Three dominant dimensions were (1) sharing knowledge of each other's culture and society, (2) showing curiosity towards each other's culture, and (3) demonstrating skills of discovery and interaction. Excerpts that exemplify these *savoirs* will be unpacked after the communication strategies used to maintain the discussions have been analysed.

Communication Strategies

All the C1s demonstrated good IC by being eager to share their views on the discussed topics and curious about the C2s' cultures. One of the authors of this study was the English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher of the C1s, and she was surprised to see how some Chinese students who were quiet in her EFL classroom became articulate and assertive in these discussions. The C1s' proactive and inquisitive attitudes challenged the stereotyped images of reticent Chinese international students, which have been discussed in many studies (e.g., Heng, 2017; Zhu & Bresnahan, 2018; Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2020). In contrast, the C2s looked more reserved and cautious about speaking Mandarin Chinese, as supported in the reflection data, where they said that speaking a foreign language to native speakers can be a nerve-wracking experience. Their apprehension about speaking the target language is related to foreign language anxiety, which is defined as a "distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128). C1s and C2s contrasting behaviours in the initial meeting echo previous studies that L2 reticence is qualitatively different from general speaking reticence (Sang & Hiver, 2021).

In the initial interaction, the relationship between C1s and C2s was more like that of tutors and tutees. When language barriers caused conversation breakdowns, the C1s immediately offered linguistic support (scaffolding) to the C2 sitting next to them. The C2s' reticence gradually subsided in the subsequent meetings as they became familiar with the routine of meeting the C1s and gained confidence from their interactions with the C1s.

Several salient communication strategies used by the participants were observed in this study, including (1) using paralinguistic communication, such as body language and hand gestures to communicate interpersonal attitudes and emotions; (2) using mobile phones to show images of the lexical items (multimodality); (3) utilising code-switching, which refers to learners "going from one language to the other mid-speech when both speakers know the same two languages" (Cook, 2016, p. 102); and (4) cognitive strategies, such as writing new words, mainly used by C1s. By using various strategies to support their communication, participants can interact with each other despite language barriers. This study highlights the prevalence of diverse communication strategies in intercultural communication and their importance in facilitating the five *savoirs*.

An analysis and discussion of five specific exchanges in which particular *savoirs* are exemplified now follows.

Leftover Women

In the first meeting on "relationships and leftover women¹", the C2s experienced some linguistic and cultural barriers initially when the C1s brought up new culturally specific terms such as 一线城市 (first-tier city²), 独生子女 (single child) and 门当户对 (a marriage between families of equal social

¹ "Leftover women" is a derogatory term used in China to refer to single women over 30.

² First-tier city refers to the most developed cities in China such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

rank). However, with the linguistic support from the C1s and the communication strategies used by the C2s, the barriers were turned into learning opportunities for the C2s to widen their understanding of Chinese culture and society. The C2s were intrigued to learn that the age threshold for leftover women varies according to the geographic location. For example, the age threshold in first-tier cities is 30; in second-tier cities (e.g., Xiamen and Harbin), it is 27, then the age lowers further in the countryside. Some C2s were curious about whether the term also applied to men.

C2.8: 在中国一般男的比女的多，那这个情形，（她看着课本是，找词用）有女的还是也有男的？

C1.1: 剩女指的是女性，剩男指的是男性，但是男性很少用到剩男。

C1.3: 30岁的女性被称为剩女，但是30岁的男性被称为潜力股或是钻石王老五。钻石王老五就是这个男性有钱，有潜力，但是又还没有结婚。

C2.8: In China, there are more men than women (*reading the textbook, trying to find words to express her ideas*). Do you have leftover men as well?

C1.1: Leftover women refer to females and leftover men refer to males, but we rarely call men “leftover men”.

C1.3: Women in their 30s are called leftover women, but men in their 30s are called “potential stocks” or “golden bachelors,” which refers to rich, promising and single men.

The question raised by C2.8 demonstrates their desire to understand Chinese social phenomena more deeply, prompting the C1s to explain that single men, particularly successful ones, are always associated with positive terms. The extract shows the C1s acting as experts to share cultural knowledge of their own culture with the C2s. However, after acquiring the new knowledge, none of the C2s related the topic to their own culture, nor did C1s discuss why positive terms are coined for a single male, whereas there are no equivalent terms for their female counterparts. Though none of the participants pursued how and why these terms were created within their culture, which would have been skills of interpreting and relating, with appropriate guidance from tutors, an intercultural discussion like the one above can be used to develop students' critical cultural awareness and thus be another channel to promote intercultural learning (McConachy et al., 2022).

One-Child Policy

In the subsequent meetings, when the term “one-child policy” was mentioned, C1s shared more analytical reflections. They discussed the pressures of being a single child in China: getting a good job, and marrying someone of your social status or marrying up.

C1.4: 你们有没有性别歧视的问题？

C2.7: 那男孩子，男孩子 must

C1s: (必须。)(*All the C1s helped her to say “must” in Chinese.*)

C2.7: 男孩子必须就业。

C1.2: 工作。

C2 P: 我的妈妈呀, (pauses for a while...) wants me to marry a rich man.

(Everyone in the group laughs)

C1.1: 她跟我想得一样。

C1.4: Do you have a gender discrimination issue here?

C2.7: The boys **must** (*in English*)...

C1s: Bixue. (*All the C1 helped her to say "must" in Chinese.*)

C2.7: Boys must get employed.

C1.2: Get a job,

C2.7: But my mum..... (*a long pause*) **wants me to find a rich man** (*in English*).

C1.1: She is thinking what I am thinking. (*Everyone in the group laughs.*)

Like C2.8, who was curious about the social phenomena in China, C1.4 was equally curious about gender equality issues in the UK. C2.7's reply indicated that she comprehended the questions but was constrained by her vocabulary when trying to express her ideas in Chinese. However, with linguistic support (translation) from the C1s and her code-switching strategy, she was able to share her view with her counterparts, exemplifying the notion that with appropriate scaffolding (Harper & Chen, 2018), less competent speakers can gain communicative competence through engaging in genuine dialogues with their peers. The laughter from the participants indicated their amusement about the topic of pursuing a rich husband. It could be interpreted as a joke or a wish, but what is significant is that the participants from both cohorts had discovered a commonality or a thread narrative (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017).

ABC Night

The data showed that when the topics discussed were related to British culture and lifestyle, the C1 students were inquisitive about university life, ranging across nightlife, UK timetable issues and food. This curiosity turned the C2 students into cultural ambassadors, providing native speaker knowledge to assist the C1 students in understanding life in the UK, which can be considered as the first step of intercultural understanding. Here is an example related to university nightlife.

C1.11: 我想知道每周三晚上有什么活动, 因为每次我一走出来, 就看到一群人在外面。

C2.5: 每个星期我们会会有一个Themes, 我们就 dress up。你12点 开始喝酒, 然后喝到最后一家酒吧, 你就去 night club, 每个星期是特伦特的 big night。

C1.17: 在我们隔壁的那个宿舍会有 underwear night 就是每个人都穿 Underwear 在 reception 跳舞。

C2.5: 我们大学有一个 Theme 叫 ABC。Anything but clothes, 你可以穿 anything, paper bag, cupboard.

C1.11: I want to know what event is happening every Wednesday night. Every time I walk out of the hall, there are always a lot of students outside.

C2.5: We have a weekly theme night, and people dress up for the event. You start pub crawling at 12. When you finish the last pub, you go to a nightclub. Wednesday night is a big night at our university.

C1.17: The residential hall next to ours has an underwear night. Everyone wears underwear and dances at the reception.

C2.5: Our university has a theme party called ABC, Anything But Clothes. You can wear anything – paper bags, cupboards – but not clothes.

Though constrained by a shortage of specific vocabulary for the topic discussed, C2.5 successfully answered the question using code-switching. As the basic Chinese sentence structures had provided a frame, using isolated words (themes, dress up, big night) in English provided material to fill out the frame (like putting flesh onto the skeleton) (Myers-Scotton, 2005, as cited by Cook, 2016, p. 185) and maintain the communication. The extract above shows that code-switching was also used by the C1s for a different function: to express new cultural phenomena. The reactions from the C1s suggested that the host university's nightlife culture seems "foreign" to them, as none shared their experiences of participating in these events. This is further evidenced when C1.17 keeps "underwear night" in the source language rather than translating it into an equivalent Chinese word.

This extract also showed how the C1s demonstrated their discovery skills by recognising the significant phenomena in a foreign environment and attempting to elicit their meaning. However, similar to the previous discussion on "leftover women", when the discussed topic was more culturally specific, the participants showed open-minded attitudes to acquire knowledge of specific cultures but demonstrated fewer skills to relate the cultural phenomena to their own culture. If there were some prompts from the tutors, they could guide students from acquiring knowledge to further developing their interpreting and relating skills (Byram, 2021).

Regarding communication skills, it is also interesting to see how C2.5 politely reformulated the term "underwear night" used by C1.17 into "ABC" night without making the other party lose face by insisting on the accurate term. This could have been a pragmatic decision to maintain conversational flow to prioritise the skills of discovery and interaction that were in motion at this point in the discussion and a sign of successful communication. As pointed out by Byram (2021), the indirectness of politeness is essential in intercultural communication. as it demonstrates the interlocutor's willingness to relate and maintain relationships.

To Eat or Not to Eat

These IC skills are also evidenced in the following example, where the C2s provide advice to help the C1s adjust to the British teaching schedule.

C1.18: 如果有课从九点上到一点，我就觉得很奇怪，因为没有时间吃饭。

C2.5: 你上课的时候可以吃。

C1.11: 可以吃香蕉，吃苹果。

C1.18: 我的饭就是一顿正常的饭，有人帮我炒一盘菜。

C1.11: 就是早上吃得比较晚，九点吃早饭，到下午一点也还不觉得饿，所以刚好下午2:00 吃饭。这样一天吃两顿还可以减肥。

C1.18: 不行，不行。

C1.18: I have a lecture from 9:00 to 1:00; it is an odd schedule because I don't have time to eat lunch.

C2.5: You can eat during the lecture.

C1.11: You can eat bananas or apples.

C1.18: For me, my lunch must be a proper meal; someone cooks a stir-fried dish for me.

C1.11: You can have a late breakfast at 9, and then you won't feel hungry till, so you only need to eat two meals a day. It also helps with weight loss.

C1.18: That's not me.

In China, university teaching normally starts at 8:00 a.m., followed by a lunch break at noon for a hot meal in the canteen. The extract indicates the C1s' different attitudes toward the change they encountered in the UK and their various degrees of adjustment: some found it challenging, whereas others saw it as an opportunity to lose weight and save money (C1.11). The participants' various degrees of readiness to adjust to the host culture indicate their different ICC. As each individual goes through the acculturation process differently (Jackson, 2014), intercultural discussions provide a platform for them to interact with the members from ingroups and outgroups to share experiences and learn tips to cope with the challenges. The discussion may not lead to C1.18 to change their lunch menu, but perhaps it will enable them to view the timetable from a different perspective.

This extract also showed that food-related topics have the potential to encourage participants to articulate their preferences and enable them to relate the topic to their own culture, compared with the other two topics discussed above. From eating habits to what to eat, food can bring participants together to share their similarities and differences.

Dumplings

Festivals and food were another topic upon which participants shared varying practices from their own cultures.

C1.11: 圣诞节的时候，你们应该是一起过吧。

C2.6: 对，跟爸爸妈妈。

C1.17: 一起包水饺吧。

C1.11: 我们不吃水饺。我们吃鲍鱼海参啊，那些很贵的。

C1.17: 哇塞！

C1.18: 她不能代表中国。

C1.17: 我是北方人，我们都吃饺子。

C1.18: 在南方不吃饺子。

C1.17: 好像都吃汤圆。

C1.11: 我们在超市看到像饺子一样子的。

C2.5: 我们的是 pasta, 不是饺子。

C2.8: 它的面包是面包做的。

C2.5: 里面是 dough

C2.8: 里面没有味道。(C2.5 拿手机查资料，接着告诉大家，什么是英式水饺 ?)

C2.5+C2.8: 我们的英国菜是没有味道的。

C1.11: Do you spend Christmas with your family?

C2.6: Yes, with my parents.

C1.17: Do you make dumplings together? (To the whole group.)

C1.11: We don't eat dumplings; we eat abalone and sea cucumbers, the expensive stuff.

C1.17: Wow!

C1.18: She cannot represent China (talking to C2s).

C1.17: I am a northerner, and we all eat dumplings.

C1.18: It seems that in the south people do not eat dumplings.

C1.17: Think they all eat sticky rice balls.

C1.11: We have seen something like Chinese dumplings in the local market.

C2.5: Ours are pasta, not dumplings.

C2.8: It's made of wheat.

C2.5: Inside, it is dough (in English).

Food is usually an excellent mechanism for cultural exploration and connecting with people, so it is unsurprising that the topic of dumplings sparked an exciting discussion on cultural representation and cultural diversity. The dialogue above showed that even participants coming from the same large culture were amazed at each other's cultural practices, so a mutual understanding was not just built between C1s and C2s, but within the C1 ingroup as well. The discussion creates an opportunity for both cohorts to develop the skill of discovery and interaction (Byram, 1997, 2009) and acquire new knowledge of cultural practices and diversity within their own culture.

This discussion can also be seen as an example of intracultural competence; i.e., a social exchange carried out by members of the same culture or social group (Yang & Yeh, 2021). As all the Chinese students are C1s from different parts of China (the large culture), they bring with them their own regional cultural heritage. In the case of China, given the vast geographic distance, gaining knowledge of these intracultural differences and developing intracultural competence is as equally important as developing IC, as Holmes and Dervin (2016, p. 8) point out, "Our world is obsessed with difference, especially difference across – and rarely within – in relation to interculturality and imagined fictions such as the East versus the West, speakers of French versus speakers of English." In recent years, studies on intracultural competence have started to receive more attention in EFL classrooms, as more language educators became aware that intracultural competence is the foundation for IC (Mehdaoui, 2024; Yang & Yeh, 2021). For example, Yang and Yeh (2021) designed a study in which higher-education EFL students created YouTube videos to introduce Taiwanese culture to global audiences. By introducing their own local culture via the internet, the students enhanced their intracultural competence, a fundamental component of their development as cross-cultural communicators. Being more acutely aware of one's own culture can act as a key foundation in building the *savoir* of critical cultural awareness.

Reflection Data

Affective States

As previously mentioned, the students were asked to send oral reflections in English after each discussion, giving their personal thoughts and feelings about the way the discussion happened and what they discussed. Unsurprisingly, the largest category of commentary related to the affective states of the students. Positive emotions dominated this category (71%), with students reporting feelings such as pride, satisfaction and happiness. However, there were also repeated references to feelings of apprehension which were articulated by the C2s and remind us how nerve-racking it can be to converse with native speakers of a language one is in the process of acquiring, as per the notion of foreign language anxiety previously discussed. However, after several discussions had occurred, the students indicated that they felt they had built their confidence and experienced a sense of achievement of having successfully navigated a discussion with native speakers.

C2.3: I was very nervous because even though I've been to China, and I have been told that I speak fairly good Chinese, I was worried that my Chinese skills wouldn't be up to par because I have forgotten a lot of it. So, it was very nerve-wracking... By the end of the discussion, you always feel a lot more confident, and you feel quite like proud of yourself for being able to do it

C2.2: I think these discussions definitely make me less nervous about talking to Chinese students. There's always the fear that our language won't be good enough to communicate with them. But doing these discussions definitely proves that it's not as daunting as we think.

On the other hand, the emotion of happiness was exclusively reported by the C1s, who were delighted to have the opportunity to meet non-Chinese students and speak Mandarin with them. The two comments below demonstrate this positive affective state but also indicate cultural learning, which was the second-largest coding category seen in the reflection data:

C1.2: It's very happy to met [sic] some friends who are interested in Chinese culture.

C1.7: I was in a positive emotion after the session because most of them have been to China for a year. And I think they do not have much, many biases of China, especially when the topic's a little bit sensitive.

Cultural Curiosity and Thread Thinking

Both the responses of C1s shown above indicate excitement that the C2s showed interest in Chinese culture. C1.7's statement suggests they may have been cautious about discussing sensitive topics with the C2s before meeting them but they were pleased to know that the C2s did not hold biases regarding social issues in China. This can be linked to open-mindedness and curiosity about different cultures, which are highlighted in Byram's framework (1997, 2021) and are the first steps towards intercultural communication (Byram, 2009; Deardorff, 2006).

However, one C1 stated that the lack of shared cultural reference points was the biggest challenge she had encountered in interactions with non-Chinese students to date.

C1.15: We've talked to the, you know, the foreign students all the time. And some, I think the biggest problem for us is background thing. So, you talked about different Chinese things... and they don't understand... And then that you must use the gestures and expressions that may change to make them understand what you said.

When C1s try to talk in English about things that are important to them from China, they end up needing to use Chinese words that are not understood but also recognising the power of paralinguistics (e.g., hand gestures, raised eyebrows, nodding) for clarification. This example underlines the need to keep creating opportunities for exchanging information and asking questions to banish ignorance and hopefully lead to greater intercultural learning (Eisenclas & Trevaskes, 2007).

Some of the students' reflections aligned with Byram's *savoirs*, with C1.9's comment below connecting to the skill of interpreting and relating (Byram, 1997, 2021) and C1.7's comment recognising the results of the skill of discovery and interaction.

C1.9: I talked to Rachel. She told me that her mother gave her name Rachel because her mother really like, like, the sitcom *Friends* and likes Rachel the best. And I love that. I love *Friends* very much.

C1.7: When I'm going to communicate with non-Chinese students, I feel I think I will feel more relaxed because we do have a lot of similarities in common, which can break the awkward distance.

It is interesting to consider these reflections on culture through the lens of block and thread narratives mentioned earlier. The examples above suggest the nurturing of cultural threads through the recognition and creation of shared meaning (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017), rather than relying on easier essentialist othering, which can be a potential site of cultural prejudice. For example, through discussing TV drama, C1.9 discovered the commonality she had with her counterpart, with the formation of small culture connections (Holliday, 2011) helping the participants to renegotiate their understanding of each other. Another C1 student also recognised not only these cultural threads but also their benefit in reducing the distance they felt between themselves and non-Chinese students.

C1.9: It is really nice to speak Chinese to people from other countries, and I think the experience is helpful for them too; maybe they didn't learn some specific words or sentences yet, but language actually can help to build the way of thinking. So, through talking to native speakers, they may know better about, you know, the people, language, or the culture.

Closing the Gap

Eisenchlas and Trevaskes (2007) described the reported lack of social integration between international and home students as two parallel streams of students who exist in close proximity to each other but, in most cases, have very little or only superficial contact. The reflection data show that students recognise the power of these types of intercultural conversations to build a bridge between these two streams:

C1.10: I think this conversation can strengthen the relationship with the foreign students [C2s] and provide a good opportunity to, to make a communication with others.

C2.6: And in terms of what we talked about, I think the most exciting thing was hearing their opinions of the UK. And obviously, they haven't been here as long as we have. So, it was interesting to kind of hear what they thought about it. We ended up talking about, I think, girls going on nights out, but it did turn into a really normal kind of conversation. It didn't feel like a speaking topic discussion or anything; it just felt like a natural conversation, which was really nice.

The latter part of C2.6's comment also shows how the pertinence of the topic drives the fluency of the conversation. This was a strong theme in the data, with several of the C2s' reflections emphasising the importance of being able to talk on a topic they can relate to and have a shared interest in. It was also evident that once those intercultural conversations had happened, possible thread narratives emerged.

Conclusion

This study applied Byram's IC framework to explore how intercultural dialogues between UK home students (C2s) and Chinese students studying in the UK (C1s) contributed to their IC. The data shows that the participants demonstrate several salient intercultural attributes that fall into the IC dimensions of attitudes, knowledge and skills of discovery and interaction, and some degree of interpreting and relating. Regarding attitudes, participants showed curiosity about each other's cultures and were ready to suspend disbelief about new concepts and activities (as in the cases of leftover women and ABC night). With open-minded attitudes, they demonstrated skills to acquire new cultural knowledge

from each other (e.g., about dumplings and pasta), negotiate a solution (such as the case of having a lecture during mealtime), and find commonality (finding a rich husband, travelling, enjoying the same sitcoms). However, the participants showed fewer skills in relating culturally specific topics to their culture. As pointed out by Byram (2021), the four aspects of IC skills (knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, and skills of discovery and interaction) can be acquired through experiences and reflection. This study showed that the participants demonstrated fewer skills in interpreting and relating in the student-led discussion, which highlights the role of tutors in guiding students to develop these skills.

The reflection data show that participants experienced various degrees of anxiety in the initial stage of interaction. The C2's anxiety was mainly related to foreign language anxiety or apprehension about communication in the target language, whereas the C1's anxiety, to some extent, was related to the global position and politics of China. During the discussion, the Chinese students demonstrated competence in articulating their views on the discussed topic and provided language support and cultural knowledge to the C2s. Their active role in the discussion presents a different image of Chinese students from that discussed in other studies. Crucially, the role of C1s is not just limited to providing language support and cultural knowledge. The C1s themselves gained confidence from finding the commonalities between themselves and home students, such as their passion for travelling, their love for some TV programmes and their interest in food. These commonalities provide threads so they can connect.

Our study has shown that dialogue can be a site of instruction, conversation and inquiry. However, to achieve this, there needs to be mutual scaffolding, where the students can both learn from each other in terms of language and also interculturally. To be most effective, intercultural activity also needs to be in a context of experiential learning, where the participants are properly prepared and where they are given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and consciously develop new knowledge and skills. It is suggested that it is incumbent on higher education lecturers, especially language teachers, to create these third spaces for intercultural exploration so that more thread narrative thinking can emerge rather than instinctive reliance on block thinking and large culture stereotypes (Holliday, 2018). This study has also shown how dialogue with native speakers can challenge and build confidence for learners of Mandarin.

Suggestions for Further Research

A limitation of this study was that it was based on a small sample of CFL learners, and the composition of the C1 participants varied between discussions. Although the study has yielded rich data exemplifying how intercultural communication unfolds, additional similar studies to broaden our understanding would be beneficial.

Two themes that emerged from this study are intracultural competence and language awareness. The data showed that participants demonstrate different levels of intracultural competence, particularly Chinese participants. The individuality shown by the participants challenges the essentialist view of national culture but also raises the issue of the intersection between intracultural competence and IC. Further research on this issue is worth pursuing.

This research also draws our attention to how intercultural conversation can be a rich site for learners to explore the interconnection between language and culture. In this series of unguided discussions, the students mainly focused on the linguistic level of cultural terms and topics, overlooking their deeper sociolinguistic context. How to better encourage that movement into more substantial critical cultural awareness is another area that deserves further pedagogical research.

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Appendix A Post-discussion Reflection Prompts

1. How did you feel **during** the discussion? (Your emotions, be they positive or negative, while the group discussion was happening.)
2. How did you feel **after** the discussion? (Your emotions, be they positive or negative, about the experience now.)
3. What did you find most interesting about **HOW** the discussion happened? (The way you and the others in your group discussed/interacted with each other.)
4. What did you find most interesting about **WHAT** you talked about during the discussion? (The **content** of the topical discussion about women's role in society.)
5. Have the conversations you've had with the non-Chinese students in this class made you feel differently about future interaction with non-Chinese students? How?*
6. Have the conversations you've had with the Chinese students in this class made you feel differently about future interaction with Chinese students? **
7. During the conversations, do you often switch languages? If you do, what makes you switch from Chinese to English? * *
8. Anything else you want to tell us about the experience?

*New question added for C1s.

**Questions added February–March for C2s.